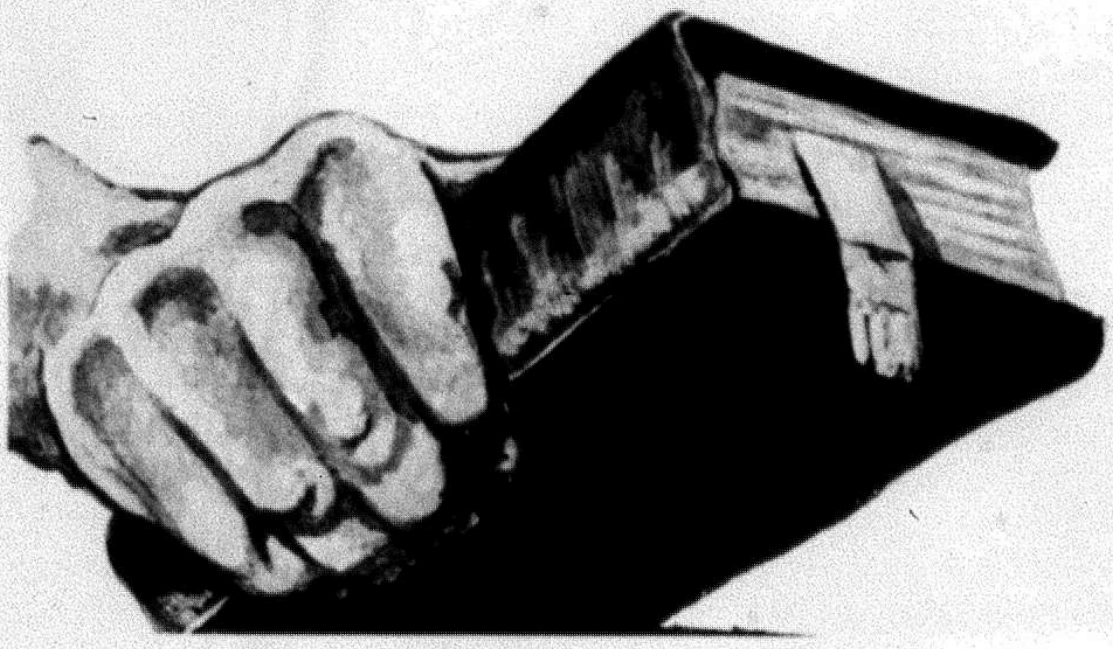
Why Prayer is not Answered



Marion Zimmer Bradley appears here for the first time, although she is well known in the science fiction field for THE WINDS OF DARKOVER *and other excellent novels. She is also, coincidentally, married to Walter Breen, author of the astrology article in* ORION *for September-October. A happy coincidence on all counts.*

by Marion Zimmer Bradley

The title of this article is guaranteed to get under the skins of all those who firmly believe in—and have proven to their own satisfaction—the power of prayer. Of course prayer is answered, they'll say.

And, of course, they're right—but not always, and not in the way the person who prays might expect.

There is a very old spiritual law which says that you can have absolutely anything you want—but you must know how to ask for it, you must want it more than you want anything else, and nothing must be allowed to stand in its way.

This is literally true. It doesn't matter whether you call it Positive Thinking, Spiritual Affluence, or Creative Visualization—or whether you have your own name for it; *I* call it the Law of Abundance. It is all the same thing, and the laws by which it works are unfailing and identical; but many try it, without completely understanding it, thus it *doesn't* work for them and they don't understand why.

The laws by which this process works are narrow and fairly rigid, and the side-tracks which can divert you from it are many. The main reason which keeps people from getting what they pray for, though, is simple:

They don't want it enough.

They think they do; but when it comes to the crunch, there is something else they want more.

The "something else" they want may not be bad. It may even

be better for them than what they think they want, and what they're praying for. It is simply that they can't have both.

Let me give you an example; a parable.

A young student has been working four years for his college degree. Yet all those years, he says, he has dreamed of travel. One day he states his dream.

"I want to travel in Europe more than anything in the world," he says. "All my life I have dreamed of it. I lie awake nights just wanting to get to Europe."

"Is that so?" says the kindly stranger. "God must have sent you to me, for here in my hand I have a plane ticket to Europe which expires tonight, and other business keeps me from using it. Here, young friend, take this ticket, pack your toothbrush, hurry to the airport and catch the plane which leaves in twenty minutes, and your prayer is answered."

Does the young man go?

Maybe one time in fifty, he does. More often, "Oh, if I only could," he says, "but tomorrow is my final examination, and the week after that is my graduation."

"But I thought you wanted to go to Europe more than anything in the world."

"Yes, but I've worked so hard for my diploma. . . ."

And in the end he does not go. He thought he wanted a trip to Europe, but what he *really* wanted was a trip to Europe *and* his education.

Now be clear about one thing: I am *not* blaming this young man, except for not being clear in his own mind about his goals. Probably, with his excellent education, he will earn his way some day to the trip of his dreams. No doubt, in the long run, the diploma is of more value to him than a plane ride to Europe. The point of this little story is to illustrate what often happens—that what we think we want is only *a part* of what we want. We want it, *and* something else—often four or five something-elses. The fact is clear; when what he said he wanted was offered, he did not want it enough, so he had to realize it, settle for his real first-priority goal (his diploma, now so near) and then start besieging

heaven with his prayers again. And if the chance were offered again, would he take it? Or, by then, would he have found a third goal for himself?

This young man is not evil, or wrong-headed, or any of those things. He is Legion. He is the ordinary average man, who sometimes wonders why prayer, or the power of positive thinking, or whatever, doesn't work for him.

Now let us consider some young men who were NOT so average. Francis of Assisi, for instance.

He wanted to serve God.

Probably he also wanted what every other young man wants. He probably wanted to please his family, to have a happy and comfortable life, and to be liked and respected by the neighbors. No one would have blamed him if he had decided to refuse God's call; he would have lived a pleasant life in Assisi, the comfort of his father's old age, a respectable member of the community. Nothing else would have happened to him, except that no one outside of Assisi would have remembered him for three years, let alone three centuries, after his death. Francis wanted to do his thing with such intensity, that none of his other wants meant anything to him—for this one thing he was willing to give up his father's wealth, to be called a madman by friends and relatives, to be poor and hungry and homeless.

Yet, reading his writings, no one can doubt he was a happy, even an ecstatic man. There is joy in every line of his canticles. He had his reward, on Earth, even if you happen not to believe in Heaven.

Another perfect example: There was a young man in the BIBLE who came up to Jesus of Nazareth and asked him "Rabbi, what shall I do to be saved?" Christ didn't say anything odd or peculiar, at first; he simply rehearsed the ten commandments and told him to keep them, and to love God. Now if this fellow had been the average or ordinary young man, this would have kept him busy for the rest of his life.

But this fellow was *not* an average young man; a little more was expected of him. He was not satisfied with Jesus' answer,

and said, "Master, all this have I done from my childhood." In other words; "I've already done that, I think I'm ready for the next step on the way."

So this remarkable Rabbi levelled with him, and gave him the next step; "Then go, sell what thou hast and give to the poor, and follow me."

You can almost see the young man's mind working. "What? Me, who has kept the Commandments all my life? Must I do this too? There's nothing in the Law and the Prophets about this! People will call me crazy! Why can't I keep what I've got and be saved right here?"

So the BIBLE tells us the young man "went away sorrowing; for he had great possessions."

It doesn't say anywhere that this young man was damned, or that Jesus reproached him, or cursed him. He probably went on keeping the Commandments, and may have lived an excellent life, a happy life, as a pillar of his community.

But he had wanted something more; and he never got that. He never became one of the inner circle.

In the twentieth century, a great many young men—not any more average than the fellow who went away sorrowing—are confused about what they want. I sometimes wish I had a dime—even at today's inflated meat prices—for everyone who has said something like this to me:

"I'd like to drop out of college and study art. I can't hardly stand the work I'm doing. But I can't stand to hurt my mother's feelings and she's always wanted me to be a teacher."

I have heard many men say, in confidence: "I hate wearing neckties to the office. I'd do anything to get rid of having to wear them. I wish all men would quit wearing them."

But if you suggest that nothing would be easier than making a bonfire of the offending garments, or point out a Goodwill box on the corner with a large handy slot for donations, it comes out what he *really* wants. His boss wouldn't like it. Everyone in the office wears one. He wants to quit wearing neckties, but—even more—he wants to be thought of as "properly dressed."

I've heard women say: "My feet hurt terribly in these high heels—I can't stand them. Oogh, my girdle!"

But point out that flat sandals are sold on every corner, and that many women have chosen to wear loose flowing dresses, regardless of fashion, and you discover quickly that she doesn't really want her feet to stop hurting, or her waistline freed. What she really wants is to have her legs admired.

"Men all like high heels," she'll say—and the pains in her feet mean nothing to her, compared with what she *really* wants—to have her legs and figure admired by some hypothetical man who likes high heels. Furthermore, she will joyously band together to criticize some other woman who wears flat "space shoes" or sandals, even if that woman answers the comments about men liking high heels with: "So I'll find a man who likes low heels instead."

Now once again, I am not criticizing these people, although their lives would be simpler if they ever stopped to figure out exactly what it is they want, and why. I am simply pointing out that what people *think* they want is often only secondary to what they *do* want.

And obviously, then, these people are in no position to send up prayers for what they want. If this hypothetical woman went to some faith-healing service, and offered up prayers for the relief of pain in her aching feet, it is extremely doubtful if her prayers could be heard—at least until she had decided that she really wanted relief from aching feet, and had taken the first step by doing what *she* could do to relieve them. The law of Occam's Razor—a philosophical concept which says among other things that one must seek the simplest solution that fits all the facts—makes it unlikely that prayer will relieve a pain which could be more simply relieved by the small sacrifice of vanity. If one believes in faith healing (and I don't know whether I *believe* in it, but I've seen it work) one has to assume it follows natural laws; the woman whose pains could be relieved by throwing her high heeled shoes into the garbage can and wearing ballet slippers will be passed over.

Often, in the milieu in which I live and write, I find the person

who longs desperately for spiritual experience. The sale of such books as PSYCHIC POWERS FOR THE MILLIONS and DEVELOP YOUR SPIRITUAL POWERS IN TEN EASY LESSONS is a mere straw in the wind. But although they do give a few easy paths for the *beginning* of spiritual power, the best ones all make it clear that after the first simple steps, it's a full-time job.

"I can't give up everything to become an Adept," says one man. "I have to get security for my wife and children. I have to make a living and a comfortable life for myself."

Once again, there is nothing wrong with this. He presumably acquired the wife and children before he ever got the desire to become an Adept, and he is to be honored for feeling that their welfare must be considered. If he does this with a genuine awareness of his obligations balanced against his spiritual needs, it is to his credit.

But all too often, the man who would shrink—like the young man with great possessions—from giving up everything in the quest for spiritual growth, uses his obligations as an excuse to abandon *all* spiritual search, and turn to the materialistic life, wanting more and more *things*. . . .

But does this mean that a man can't pray for something unless he's willing to give up everything else?

Well, he can't pray for as *much*, that's for sure. The books with such titles as THINK AND GROW RICH, or USE YOUR MENTAL POWER TO BECOME A MILLIONAIRE, hint that anyone who can train his mind sufficiently can use mental powers—prayer, if you like—to get a niee home in the suburbs, a big house, jewelry, money, a well-paying job, the respect of your neighbors, an exciting life with lots of travel and vacations, and spiritual adventures on top of all that. Are these books pure fakery, then?

Maybe not *pure* fakery. I know people who have gotten a lot of money, through the rule that you must want it more than anything else. To make money through mental power, you must—quite literally—become obsessed with money to the point where, when you tie your shoes in the morning you must ask yourself,

"Will tying these shoes help me to make money today?" and so with everything you do. If eating your sandwich at lunch will *not* help you make money, literally, you don't eat it—you get your lunch somewhere else, where you *can* make a better business contact or financial arrangement!

It works incredibly—but there's a sting in the tail. I knew a man who decided to concentrate entirely on money-making for a few years so that he would have money to study music and compose. He was an overwhelmingly talented man in half a dozen fields, and he became, in a scant six years, almost a millionaire. But that six years had wrought a tragic change in him, for by the time he had the money he had once vowed to devote to his composing, he had spent five years without once touching his piano, his cello, his flute and bassoon, his books.

He said, when asked about his decision: "Oh, music. That was just a juvenile notion. Now I've got a business to look after." The very act of making money had altered the man himself beyond recognition. Yet he had sincerely loved music, and the world of music is much the poorer by the loss of his strange and lovely compositions, now never to be completed or published—so that his use of mental power backfired.

If he truly wanted music, he would have done better to stick with it and trust to the law of abundance to support him, to give him food and a roof over his head. He might have slept on the floor in another musician's studio for four of those years, eaten soup or cadged meals from other music lovers who would have welcomed a chance to help him. He would never have been rich. But he would have been what he was meant by his talents to be; so asking for material benefits is a very dangerous game. Better to figure out what you want, pray for *that*—and let the power I referred to as the Law of Abundance take care of the how.

Once again, I'm not saying there's anything wrong in wanting or enjoying material possessions. In fact, if they are your desire, then you're obviously at a stage of development where you still need them.

Enjoy them! There is no virtue in pretending to give them up,

for unless you sate your desire in *this* life, occult theory postulates that you will be sent back again and again, to learn; you don't "give up" possessions, any more than a baby gives up a bottle; you simply outgrow them, after many lives.

Once again, we have gone some distance from the question of why prayer does not, sometimes, give you what you want. It may be that you don't know exactly what you want, or how to ask for it; you cannot, for instance, pray for Love and demand the right to go on hating your army drill-sergeant, your horrible old uncle, or even the motorist who jams his car in front of you and makes you drive another three miles on the freeway because he cut you off from the exit.

So if you pray for something, ask yourself what you're doing to prevent the answer—usually, if you're honest with yourself, you'll discover that you have sent in, as it were, a requisition for two conflicting goals.

So the first law is to be very sure that you *really* want what you ask for. Many men have abandoned good jobs, and good marriages, because of a temporary infatuation for some other woman. This man lets nothing stand in his way; not his wife, his job, his reputation or his caution. When he's through, they may be gone; he has given them up for the girl. Maybe one time in a hundred, he and the other woman live happily ever after. The other ninety-nine times the man discovers he has sold his birthright for a mess of pottage hardly worth eating.

So this is the second caution in the technique for mental prayer: Be careful what you pray for. You might get it.

That is so well known that it's become a joke. But it isn't. It's literally true. So before giving all you have for the pearl of Great Price, be very sure it isn't straight out of the dime store.

Otherwise, there is almost no limit to this technique. It is the most powerful force in the world. It's lucky that very few people have the strength to use it, because very few people know what they want, or could live with it if they got it.

—Marion Zimmer Bradley

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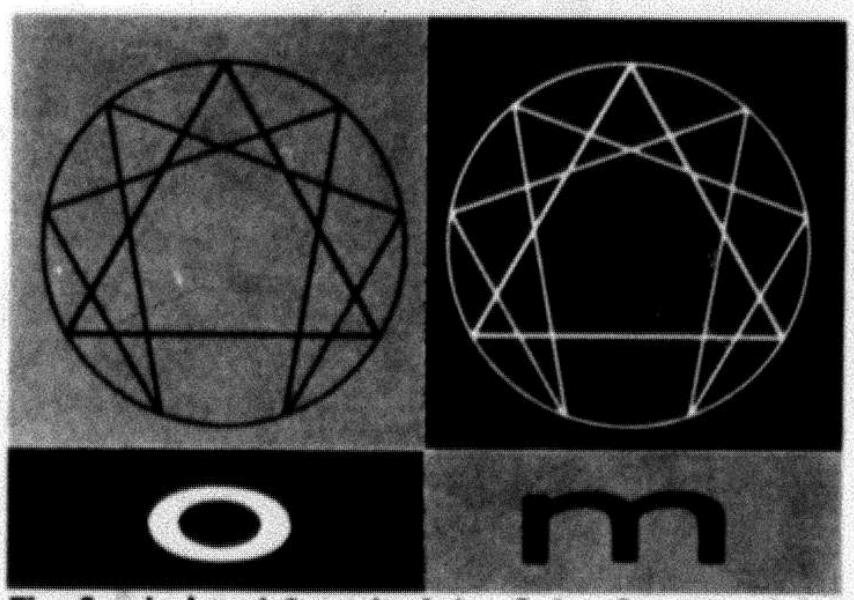

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